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Experimental Religion Exemplified.

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A

DISCOURSE

OCCASIONED BY THE DEATH OF THE LATE

MRS. MARY S. DIMON.

Preached June 6, 1852.

BY

LYMAN H. ATWATER, D.D.

PASTOR OF THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH IN FAIRFIELD.

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PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.
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NEW HAVEN:

PRINTED BY B. L. HAMLEN,

Printer to Yale College.

1852.

*Mr. Anne Johnson
With the regards of
O. Dimon*

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DISCOURSE.

MARK XIV, 8.—She hath done what she could.

THIS is a part of our Saviour's rebuke of Judas for his foul accusations and inuendoes against the pious Mary, as if she had been guilty of wanton waste and of robbing the poor, when she poured precious ointment upon his head. Christ justified this because it was a manifestation of love to himself, and because it was her best and only opportunity of displaying it, while she would never lose the privilege of ministering to the poor. "The poor," says he, "ye have always with you, but me ye have not always." But I do not propose to dwell upon the general principle so beautifully enforced by our Saviour in this touching narrative, to wit, that holy affection and devout feeling have a higher intrinsic excellence than any other human endowment, and a worth far exceeding all that it costs to nourish and exercise them. What I propose now to treat of particularly, is the specific sentiment of the text, "She hath done what she could." This was Christ's justification and commendation of her, that she had "done what she could." Hence it appears from Scripture as well as reason, that we have fulfilled our duty when we have rendered the utmost service to God, of

which our faculties are capable. In this sense, ability is the measure of obligation. God does not require the child to know and love Himself with the faculties of a Baxter: or a man to reach that breadth and intensity of love to which angelic natures alone are equal. If we are willing and disposed to do our duty, He requires only that of which we are physically capable. God does not require us to make bricks without straw, nor to utter prayer if we have not the gift of speech. So Christ represents the subject. He deals with all "according to their several ability;" and requires them to put to use the talents which they have, not those which they have not. He would not endure the calumnious apology of the wicked and slothful servant, that he was an hard Master, "reaping where he had not sown and gathering where he had not strewn." So Paul states the doctrine in regard to giving for the help of weak churches, and by parity of reason, in respect to other duties. "If there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not." This principle, that ability is the measure of obligation, applies therefore to everything except the willing mind, to whatever we may be called on to do, supposing that we have a good will to do our duty, a right heart towards God. If there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not. "She hath done what she could." This is the completest evidence of her love and devotion. And herein the doctrine of Scripture coincides with and is confirmed by the intuitive judgments of mankind. If

men have right feelings, dispositions and desires, then they stand acquitted and vindicated, when they have done all that is in their power.

But this principle does not hold with reference to the dispositions of the heart itself, either according to Scripture or the intuitive judgments of our race. The Scriptures teach, and our own consciences bear witness, that evil, wicked, ungodly dispositions are culpable and worthy of condemnation. To cavil or argue against this is to disown our moral nature, and ignore its most intimate and immoveable convictions. No one who has not argued away his conscience, will dispute that a spirit of malice, hatred, envy, revenge, of aversion to goodness, and enmity to God, is wicked, culpable, and worthy of condemnation. And however men may "reason guilt away" in respect to these things, they cannot discourse for half an hour about them, without signifying that they judge them criminal and hateful; and this, no matter whether these dispositions be natural or acquired. Withal, men are further sensible that these dispositions, and the exercise of them are voluntary and unforced—that herein they are free, and not the victims of any extraneous force or compulsion. Yet they know equally well, that they cannot extinguish a bad disposition or feeling or affection, and produce a pure and worthy feeling in its place, by the mere resolution to do so. They cannot instantly extirpate envy, malice, revenge; they cannot by any power of their own, force into existence love towards objects or persons for which they have a rooted dislike. Every one is conscious that he cannot

by any mere fiat of his own will, instantly produce love towards God or religion, even as he cannot towards a person, or a book, or a principle, which are objects of his loathing or aversion. The drunkard cannot by a mere resolution extinguish his love of his cups, nor produce a fondness for a sober life. The slave of vice knows very well that although he may by grace *resist* and withstand his inclinations to vice, yet he cannot, by the mightiest resolution he may make, utterly *extinguish* these inclinations and appetites. So when there is aversion to God and goodness in the soul, a mere resolution to love God does not accomplish it, or change the moral state. This requires a higher power: it is shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Ghost. Yet to love God supremely is the great and righteous and all-inclusive requirement of his law.

We ought to love him, and prove ourselves most depraved and guilty in not loving him. We are justly condemned for not loving him. So he declares: so our own consciences, next to his word the surest arbiters on moral subjects, testify. We could so love him indeed, if we had the inclination to do it. And no higher love is required than we are capable of, if we are fully inclined to love him. The precept is, "with all the heart, with all the mind, with all the soul, with all the strength," neither more nor less. But how shall those love him who are disinclined to love him? That such disinclination exists in the breasts of the irreligious none can dispute. That it is obdurate all experience proves. Is it a property of it to commit suicide, to expel itself from the soul? Did or can enmity to

God ever produce love ? Then indeed shall Satan cast out Satan, and man may make himself a new creature. How opposite all this is to the Bible and Christian experience, I need not say. Now although this enmity to God be invincible, insomuch that to remove it is possible, not to man, but to God alone, in the exercise of his victorious grace, yet this no way detracts from its guilt. For to say that an evil disposition in any one is invincible, is simply to assert its desperate strength and violence. And to say that a sinful propensity is innocent in proportion to its strength and violence, and our inability to conquer it, is to unsettle all moral distinctions, all our ideas of innocence and guilt, praise and blame, nay, to banish all guilt from the world.

Accordingly, we find that when the Bible speaks not of outward or other acts consequent on the choice of the will, but in reference to the moral state of the will or the dispositions of the heart themselves in fallen man, it does not make ability the measure of obligation. On the contrary it declares that "the carnal mind is enmity against God, is not subject to his law, *neither indeed can be* ; so then they that are in the flesh *cannot* please God." The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God neither *can* he know them, for they are spiritually discerned. But surely none will undertake to deny that the Bible condemns this enmity to God, this carnal mind. Every Christian will confess that his greatest burden and grief is, that depravity, those fleshly lusts, that indwelling sin, which are so obstinate as to maintain a foothold, if they do not maintain their sway, in the

soul, despite all his efforts to eradicate them ; so that even “when he would do good evil is present with him :” “what he hates that he does.” The deepest ground of repentance in the true convert is found in the oppressive consciousness that he has a heart deceitful above all things and desperately wicked ;” that such are its dark mazes of depravity that none can know it ; that it is so “desperately wicked,” that it is not in him, in and of himself truly to love God. He has found that not only are his acts more or less of them wrong, but that *he himself is wrong* in his very heart, his truest self, tainted with aversion to God and true holiness ; an aversion so powerful that it yields to no unaided efforts of his own, to nothing short of the exceeding greatness of God’s power toward those who believe, even according “to the working of his mighty power which he wrought in Christ when he raised him from the dead.” So upon this grace he casts himself. In dependence upon it he lives. While he condemns and abases himself for his evil heart, yet he thinks not in his own strength to make it better. But he knows that it is God’s exclusive work to take away the heart of stone and give an heart of flesh ; and so his constant prayer is, “create in me a clean heart O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” He lives not from himself or from self-born strength, but from Christ and from strength found in him and communicated by the grace of his Spirit. He is crucified with Christ : the old man, the natural heart dies and is put off, or is in process of dying and being put off, yet he lives : and yet not he, but “Christ liveth in him ; and

the life which he lives in the flesh is by faith of the Son of God who loved him and gave himself for him." And his own life is the best refutation of the objection that such a view of the nature, sources, and supports of Christian piety tends to apathy or inactivity. If he works not in his own strength which is weakness, he works all the more earnestly and steadfastly and vigorously in the strength of the Highest. Without Christ "he can do nothing." Through Christ strengthening him, "he can do all things." And so he "works out his own salvation with fear and trembling because God worketh in him to will and to do of his own good pleasure." Thus he presses forward in the divine life, dying unto sin, living unto God, putting off the old man which is corrupt according to deceitful lusts, and putting on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness: laying aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset him, running with patience the race set before him, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith. Thus he labors and perseveres with the faith and patience of the saints, and of them that keep the commandments of God. He is steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as his labor is not in vain in the Lord. His efforts are not vain, because they are in the Lord. From him he is evermore replenished with exhaustless vigor, so that his bow abides in its strength; he is neither weary nor faint in his mind, while others who trust in themselves, flag, and falter, and fall into apostacy. He is a tree of the Lord full of sap. His leaf does not wither, because

his root is in the Lord, not in himself. Thus he does what he can, and so makes it manifest what the Lord has done for him and in him. And he outdoes all others because he is strong, not in himself, but in the Lord and the power of his might. His whole life illustrates that great saying of Paul so unintelligible to the unbeliever, "When I am weak, then am I strong." This principle underlies and interprets all his devotions, all his practical maxims. It breathes in his prayers; it sings in his songs; it is the life of his life. Men may theorize and reason against it. They may see divers hard problems connected with it which puzzle the metaphysicians, and the religionists of this world. His own life solves the problem to his own satisfaction, because it is a constant realization of it. And his best answer to all skeptical cavils is: Christianity is not a "theory or a speculation, but a life; not a philosophy of life, but a living process." If you would know it, try it. Live it and you shall find its reality and blessedness, by the divine light of experience. And before this light your difficulties shall vanish like a veil of mist before the sunbeams. All the problems of the schools will receive their practical solution in the ejaculation of the ancient Psalmist, "I will run in the way of thy commandments, when thou dost enlarge my heart;" or in those words of the sweet Psalmist of our modern Israel, which so beautifully utter the feelings of the saints of all generations,

"From thee the overflowing fount,
Our souls shall drink a rich supply,
While such as trust their native strength
Shall melt away and droop and die."

These principles were remarkably exemplified in the life and character of that mother in Israel, whom we a few days since followed to the grave—who had been a member of our church longer than any of our number who survive her—and whose long career among us of eminent piety and rare devotion to heavenly things, deserves to be held in affectionate and reverent remembrance, for the encouragement and guidance of those who follow after her. For I have seldom known a person, in whom a profound experimental sense of the reality and glory of divine things; a steadfast faith; a devotional spirit; a longing and thirsting for God; a love of his word, ordinances and people; a fervent zeal for his cause; and unwearied activity and perseverance in all good works, shone out with a brighter and steadier lustre.

Mrs. MARY S. DIMON was born at New London, January 6, 1778. The daughter of pious parents, she enjoyed the inestimable advantage of Christian training and nurture. At about the age of sixteen she became the subject of deep religious impressions. These were fostered by the judicious and earnest labors of Rev. Seth Williston, then a teacher in the place, whose praise is now in all the churches as a devout man and eminent divine. He planted and nurtured many churches, and did much for the promotion of sound doctrine and pure revivals, in Western New York. He has already entered into rest. She was exercised with a profound sense of her own sinfulness, guilt, unworthiness, helplessness; and particularly of the evil

and odious nature of sin as an offense against a perfect God. These exercises were intense and protracted until she was almost crushed with self-despair. The first ray of light that dawned upon her darkened soul was from the doctrine of election. She saw that if God had chosen some to salvation, there was hope for her. The light thus faintly gleaming upon her, gradually grew to greater fullness and clearness; until she beheld the "glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." She was led to see that even the chief of sinners may be "complete in him" through the merits of his blood and righteousness; and so he was "formed in her soul the hope of glory." This hope never forsook her. Although occasionally obscured, severely tried by manifold afflictions, and by the buffetings of Satan piercing her highly nervous and sensitive nature with his fiery darts, it never utterly died out. God did not suffer his faithfulness to fail so as to abandon her to utter despair. Each successive trial of her faith proved precious, until she became strong therein, giving glory to God; and her hope became a constant anchor of her soul, staying her upon her God, even when all the waves and billows came over her.

Of this hope she was not ashamed, nor of the Saviour on whom it was based, nor of his word and cause. Without ostentation, or parade, by the spontaneous, effortless outworking of the holy longings and impulses within her, she was ever ready to speak and act for God. Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth freely spoke, even as breath flows from life. At all times, in all places, among all persons, she made it

quickly evident that the paramount, absorbing thing with her, was religion; that it commanded her intellect and her affections; that her heart was upon the things above; that her hope, her trust, her joy were in God; that it was her delight to commune with and to meditate upon Him and His Word; that it was the great end of her life, to serve and please Him,—whatsoever she did, to do all to the glory of God. Her light was not hid under a bushel. It ever shone in word and deed. Her speech was seasoned with grace, to the use of edifying.

And all this arose from another fact equally conspicuous, and equally conclusive, as evincing the genuineness of her piety. She delighted in religion and the things of religion, for their own sake, on account of their inherent beauty and loveliness. Aside from considerations of reward and punishment, it was manifest that she took pleasure, nay, found her highest pleasure, in the duties, ordinances and privileges of religion. Her devotion to God, was obviously not a hard, slavish service, extorted by fear of woe, or a mere leaden sense of duty, laying upon the soul as a yoke of bondage. It was free, glad, buoyant, the joy of her heart. She was drawn by the sweet influences of the Spirit attempering and attracting her whole inner life to God. So she longed, and thirsted, and panted, and ran after God. She ran in the way of his commandments, because He had enlarged her heart. For “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” Her spirit was not that which would have the least religion possible consistent with getting to heaven, as if

it were a burden, but she loved to dwell with God to the utmost, because His presence was fullness of joy. One thing she desired, that did she seek after; that she might dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of her life, to behold his beauty and inquire at his temple.

In all this she was constantly working out and living out the great problem of salvation, realizing and exhibiting strength in weakness. No person could have a profounder sense of spiritual helplessness, bondage under sin, inability to free himself from it, of dependence upon God for a true heart, and right spirit, for all spiritual light and strength to do works pleasant and acceptable to him. Few have prayed more earnestly and constantly for grace to help in time of need; few have received it in richer supplies or been better enabled by it, to do and suffer the whole will of God, to abound in works of faith and labors of love, and never grow weary in well-doing. All this was conspicuous to all who knew her.

At the age of 20 she made a profession of religion, and at the age of 22 she was married to the late Ebenezer Dimon of this place, where she has lived for more than half a century. She became the mother of a numerous family, many of whom have already gone to the grave, and as we hope to glory, before her, while a portion of them survive to mourn her loss. Gifted naturally with a superior mind, which had been enlarged and refined by assiduous culture, she had an uncommon thirst for knowledge and a passionate fondness for literary pursuits. When, however, she began

to be burdened with family cares, she found it impossible to consult her tastes in this particular as she had expected and desired, and still be faithful in her own house. With severe self-denial she chastised this noble passion. Her religion taught her that her first duties were to her children, and that it should be her first labor to train them up for usefulness in this world, and for glory in the world to come. Their testimony is that she spared no toil or sacrifice, necessary for their comfort or welfare; that she was ever ready to wear herself out in unresting labors and self-denials for their good. Above all, she made the religious element preponderate in their culture. In teaching, guiding, restraining, indulging, counseling, praying with and for them, her first aim was to win them to holiness and salvation. Her prayers for this purpose were not unheard. Her ceaseless efforts and manifold devices to win them to religion were not unblest. Nor did her patience and perseverance, and spirit of fervent prayer in their behalf, fail her under whatever discouragements. She herself had made her covenant with God, to be his forever, and to dedicate all that she had to him. She believed in the covenant which embraces not only us, but our children after us; she believed in the efficacy of prayer; especially prayer for the children of the covenant, and to her dying day her heart's desire and prayer for each and all of her children, and children's children, whether as yet visibly Christians or not, was, that they might be saved. Oh, that with all parents, the first thing and the last thing coveted for their children, were their salvation! In this field, all

who knew her will award her the commendation which Christ gave to Mary of old, "She hath done what she could." And not merely in this respect "hath she done what she could." Her benevolent desires were not pent up within her own household. No person had a deeper anxiety, or prayed more earnestly for the religious welfare of all the people, for the spiritual prosperity of Christians, and the conversion of unbelievers. No person engaged with more promptness and zeal in all measures adapted to promote vital piety, or to awaken the serious attention of the impenitent. No one did more to kindle devout feeling, or arrest the attention of people to the subject of religion, by the circulation of suitable books and tracts, by maintaining social, religious meetings, and above all, by the exercise of a rare talent for judicious and happy religious conversation. She has for a long time opened her house for all female prayer meetings of the old and the young. Visibly, it has for a long time been due to her that they have been maintained. God grant they may not die with her!

Her gift for intelligent and vivacious conversation, especially upon the subject of religion, must have been palpable and striking to all. To a mind naturally quick, acute, and vivid in its perceptions, was added a heart of warm affections and kindling sympathies, a highly social temperament, begetting an ardent love of society, and of social intercourse and enjoyments. In these she freely mingled. To them she largely contributed by her ready and sparkling conversation in all circles, and by the extent to which she entertained

company at her house during the memory of nearly all now living. And notwithstanding her manifold cares and labors, she found time to enrich her mind by various reading of the best works, literary and religious. Thus by natural and acquired endowments, she was remarkably qualified to adorn and vivify the social circle. But these powers she made wholly subservient to Christ. Seldom was she in any society in which she did not seek and find occasion to say something fitted to awaken heavenward impulses in some soul—to startle the thoughtless, reclaim the wayward, animate the Christian, soothe the distressed, cheer the despondent and quicken the devout. Nor did she fail to go out into highways and hedges to care for the souls of the erring, and invite them to the Gospel-feast, nor to minister to the temporal as well as spiritual necessities of the poor and distressed, nor to promote measures and associations for their relief. The heathen and unevangelized in our own and other lands were also upon her heart: and she contributed freely to all institutions and agencies for the spread of the Gospel. In short, in every sphere according to the measure of her gifts—and they were not few—"She hath done what she could" for the cause of Christ in a degree rarely equalled. Seldom can any one be removed from among us that will leave a void so difficult to be filled; one so ready to every good word and work; so greatly missed by all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.

And there is one class that will miss her beyond all others. I mean those laboring under spiritual dejection; who are on the borders of despair, tortured by

Satan's fiery darts, till they well nigh believe that God has forgotten to be gracious, and that his mercies are clean gone forever. Her knowledge of Scripture, her tact and address, and above all, her own experience of like troubles, and of deliverance from them, as out of the depths she cried unto the Lord, enabled her to sympathize with, to comprehend and prescribe for such spiritual maladies with remarkable success. Many are the broken hearts which she has thus bound up; the weary and laboring souls which she has thus led to Christ that they might find rest—who being thus uplifted from the horrible pit and miry clay, have had a new song put into their mouths even of praise to our God. On what Christian lady shall her mantle now fall? Whither shall such broken and contrite spirits go for sympathy and counsel?

Yet amid all her activity, she looked wholly to God for the success of her endeavors. "Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it." All know how she abounded in prayer for God's blessing upon her own and all efforts for the spread of Christ's kingdom. Her private journal shews that she was wont to set apart many days in the year, and particularly the Fridays before Communion for special prayer for these objects. It also bears witness to the tribulations which she suffered, and to the serene peace of mind with which amid all, she was enabled to stay her soul upon her God. One of the latest records in her journal is,

“I look back upon a life of fifty years as a professor of religion, of variable adherence to my covenant obligation, and with an acute and distinct remembrance of the first engagement. ‘In this world you shall have tribulation, but in me peace,’ were the terms of it, and this has been realized. On the part of my Father have been very many special deliverances in the time of trouble, many communications of love, great patience and lenity with afflictions peculiar and severe, but salutary, deserved and needful.”

Such is a faint sketch of the leading traits of one in whom the work of the Holy Ghost in all the fruits of experimental piety, shone out with a distinctness and lustre not often beheld. She in whom these traits were so exemplified among us, has passed away from the church militant to the church triumphant; there with perfected spirit and seraphic voice, evermore to hymn the praises which she delighted to utter on earth. To say that these graces of the spirit were shaded by infirmities and imperfections, is only saying that she had not yet gone to glory. Of these no one was at all so sensible as herself. While yet “in this tabernacle she did groan, being burdened” with them. And by reason of them her eyes were often a fountain of tears. So is it ever with the holiest of men. Even after being caught up to the third heavens, presently they have a “thorn in the flesh, a messenger sent from Satan to buffet them.” Thus are they kept humble, and taught that then only shall they be satisfied, when they awake in heaven in the likeness of their God.

And these things have I spoken not for the benefit of the dead, but of the living. They are for our ensamples. *There is such a thing as experimental religion.* It is not a mere abstraction, a dream, or a fancy, but a living reality, which in the case before us none could doubt or dispute. It is a great blessing, if that piety on which our salvation depends, can be set before us not in precepts nor doctrines, nor descriptions merely, but embodied in living examples. Let us follow these examples, so far as they were conformed to Christ. How blessed are they, whose lives show that they are "filled with the spirit?" How blessed, how heavenly the influence that would reign, even if all who name the name of Christ would thus "mind the things of the Spirit?" Who will not make it his great business to become thus "spiritually minded which is life and peace?" to be "not slothful but a follower of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises?"

